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China cracks down on independent film

It comes amid a widespread limiting of public discourse as the leadership fears for national stability

BY [LOUISE WATT](#)

People watch a documentary film about Qian Yunhui, who died fighting for better compensation for seized land, at the Beijing Independent Film Festival in Beijing, China, Friday, Aug. 30, 2013. Chinese authorities have disrupted an independent film school, shut down two film festivals and harassed organizers of a third in recent months, say independent filmmakers, who see the moves as part of a general clampdown on freedom of expression. (AP Photo/Alexander F. Yuan)

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese authorities have disrupted an independent film school, shut down two film festivals and harassed organizers of a third in recent months, say independent filmmakers, who see the actions as part of a general clampdown on freedom of expression.

Filmmakers whose edgy themes contrast with the rosier images of the country's mainstream industry are accustomed to censorship of content deemed to show China in a negative light.

But independent filmmakers say authorities now appear to be trying to chill the sharing and discussion of their films, amid a broader clampdown under Chinese leader Xi Jinping on public discourse that could potentially undermine the country's one-party rule, including the arrests of bloggers who post sensitive material and activists who have accused officials of corruption.

“They just want us to make films about food, clothes, entertainment. They don't want people to think, they don't want people to have the freedom to express themselves, they don't want people to have independent and free ideas,” said Yang Lina, an independent documentary maker whose first fictional film — about urban Chinese women — debuted at Rotterdam's international film festival this year.

“We are upset, but also find it absurd,” Yang said.

Yang was speaking during the Beijing Independent Film Festival that runs through Saturday. Police came to last week's opening and ordered the event cancelled, although organizers kept the festival going by changing some locations and programs, said Wang Hongwei, one of the festival's creators. He said few people were coming because they didn't know it was still on or were scared.

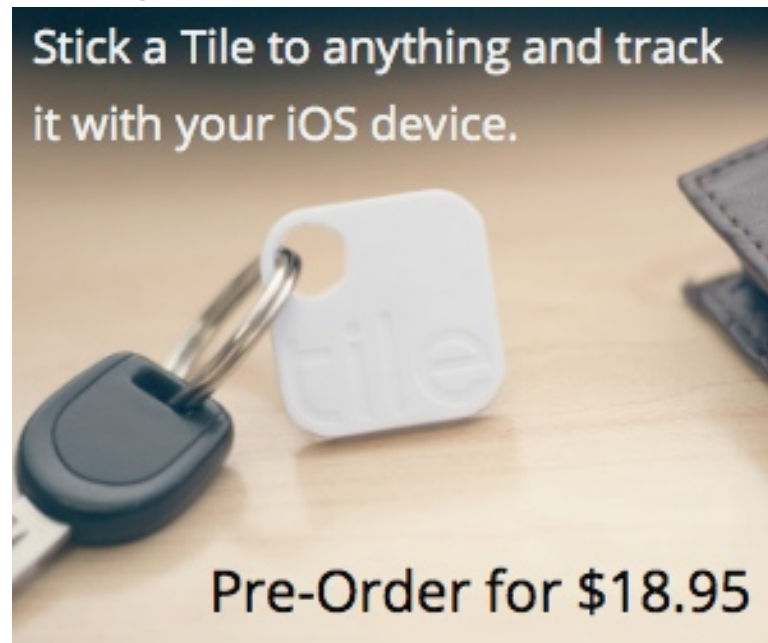
“They don't like people with interesting ideas gathering together,” said one of the jurors, Zhen Zhang, a cinema studies professor at New York University.

Other festivals fared worse. In March, the Yunnan Multi-Cultural Festival in southwest China, an influential platform for documentaries, was cancelled. In November, attendees at the 10-

year-old China Independent Film Festival in eastern Nanjing were similarly frustrated. Nanjing organizer Wang Fei said the festival's financial backers withdrew support under pressure from authorities.

Last month, police ordered the closure of China's only independent film school, the Li Xianting Film School in Beijing, saying that it was "promoting anti-social ideology," said filmmaker and faculty member Cui Zi'en.

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Organizers of the school — set up four years ago because Chinese university film departments consider independent cinema to be a form of dissent — were forced to hold the 40-day course at two other locations, one in a neighboring province and another in an undisclosed part of the capital, Cui said.

Thirty students ranging in age from their 20s to 60s were staying at a hotel in Beijing on the first day of the semester when police and officials from the Industry and Commerce bureau came and told them the school was illegal, Cui said. Police took them to train stations and told them to return home, but teachers later arranged for the students to be taught elsewhere.

"When I heard all the students had been taken away, I thought: 'How can China become so frightening?'" said Cui, who has made more than 20 films, most shown in the United States and Europe.

more than 50 films, most shown in the United States and Europe and none in China.

The Public Security Ministry, Beijing police and the Industry and Commerce bureau did not respond to requests for comment.

Authorities' targeting of film forums and festivals "is really part of a broader, civil society development that is going on in China," said David Bandurski, founder of Hong Kong-based Lantern Films and producer of four independent Chinese films.

"It's not just about films, it's about activism, it's about being tied in and participating in social issues and using film as a medium to explore those, so that's what they are really interested in nipping in the bud," said Bandurski.

The government has detained at least 55 activists since February in a wide-reaching crackdown on dissent, including ideas such as "Western constitutional democracy" and "universal ideals," Human Rights Watch said in a report Thursday.

China's mainstream movie industry is supported by the government, which sees growth potential in the world's second-biggest film market, but censorship or the expectation of it means films are often confined to safe storylines.

In the 1990s, independent filmmaking was an offshoot of mainstream film culture, but a decade or so later, artists, journalists and academics started exploring digital filmmaking, bringing new themes, such as examining poverty in rural areas or exposing the country's detention system.

Such films are rarely screened inside China except at small clubs. Some have gained critical acclaim outside China, such as Wang Bing's 9-hour "West of the Tracks," which documents the lives of workers in a decaying industrial area of China. Wang's latest film, "Til Madness Do Us Part," will be shown at the Venice Film Festival next Wednesday. None of Wang's films have been screened in his own country.

"It's not that Chinese filmmakers are going to stop making independent films, but it is certainly worrying that these avenues inside China for screening films and for sharing and talking about films have really come under attack," said Bandurski, also a

researcher at the University of Hong Kong's China Media Project.

Chinese authorities “want to manage and control the perception of China and I think that’s counter-productive,” he said.

AP journalist Isolda Morillo contributed to this report.